

A Commitment to Excellence in Genealogy: How the Public Library Became the Only Tourist Attraction in Fort Wayne, Indiana

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THE WISDOM CONCERNING genealogy in public libraries is conventional. Good professional practice, distilled in a stream of articles in state and national journals, has produced two major tenets. The first is that a public library should attempt to serve the needs of genealogists, even though the prospect may be distasteful to the library staff, because genealogists are taxpayers too.¹ The second tenet is that the genealogy collection in a public library should focus on the immediate locale or the state in which the library is located, because financial limitations and bibliographic difficulties are very great.²

I have no quarrel with the conventional wisdom. It has produced positive results in many public libraries in the United States. However, it has also limited the scope of genealogical activity and achievement in many public libraries. Strange methods and violations of the conventional wisdom, as the history of genealogy at the Fort Wayne Public Library (reorganized as the Allen County Public Library in 1980) demonstrates, can generate excellent library service, important individual achievement and national institutional recognition. Stated most broadly, the way everybody else does it may not necessarily be the way to do it when librarians make a commitment to excellence. Idiosyncratic practices, along with the conventional wisdom, can shape outstanding institutions and services.

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A History of Heterodoxy

A tradition of heterodoxy in the Fort Wayne-Allen County approach to public library service goes back at least to 1935. Early in that year, Rex M. Potterf, a well-educated high school history teacher, became chief librarian of the public library. In professional library circles the appointment of a man who lacked library training and library experience was greeted with dismay. Milton J. Ferguson lamented in *Library Journal*:

The question immediately arises: was he such a failure in a job he had been trained for that he was eager to get one he knows nothing about? It would put a humane glow over the picture if the appointee had been taken from the breadline; charity excuses many faults. But the man had a job, for which presumably he was qualified; so under the circumstances the Fort Wayne Board cannot be credited with either heart or head.³

Although Potterf eventually legitimized himself in the eyes of the library world by earning a library degree at the University of Illinois, he maintained both a unique personal approach to his work and a healthy disrespect for conventional wisdom. He solved problems with whatever means were available. His methods often seemed as strange to his contemporaries as they do to onlookers nearly half a century later. When the library needed printed material, he set up a print shop. When the library needed new furniture, he set up a carpentry shop. When the library needed space outside the walls of its bursting Carnegie building, he bought houses, gas stations and stores, and filled them with books.⁴ Characteristically, Potterf followed his own judgment in personnel matters. Early in 1935 he appointed 24-year old Fred J. Reynolds to head the Allen County department of the Fort Wayne Public Library. This appointment was no more acceptable to Milton Ferguson than Potterf's own. In an editorial in *Library Journal*, Ferguson wrote:

A high school boy who made good as a page and then was promoted to the place behind the wheel of the city book truck has now been elevated to the post of county department head. This young discoverer, who surely must know his way around, will at once undertake the reorganization of the rural library service.⁵

"What has all this," the reader asks, "to do with genealogy?" The unique Potterf approach to library collection development generated as one of its by-products the basis of an important genealogy collection. Lacking sufficient funds for new book purchasing in the 1930s, Potterf decided to fill the depleted shelves of the Fort Wayne Public Library with used books. Over a period of about fifteen years, Potterf and

Reynolds scoured the second-hand bookstores of the middle third of the United States. They bought thousands of copies of standard works of fiction and nonfiction, children's books and recent popular titles from the dusty shelves of the bookstores. In addition, they gathered many of the books which later formed the heart of the genealogy collection in the early 1960s. Both Potterf and Reynolds had strong interests in the local history of the Fort Wayne area. They expanded upon these interests as they travelled from city to city. The shelves of the Fort Wayne Public Library received the results. Late nineteenth-century county histories, for example, could be had during the 1940s for a dollar or two. Reynolds and Potterf acquired many of these books, not just for Fort Wayne or Indiana. Similarly, they bought long runs of standard nineteenth-century historical and genealogical periodicals which eventually found their way into the genealogy collection.

The emphasis on travel and purchase of used books faded in the late 1940s and early 1950s as the gradual demise of the second-hand book trade and the extensive buying of duplicates made the effort less fruitful. The impact of the effort remained. A tradition of unorthodox methods of collection development was well established. Thousands of important and useful books had been added to the library collection. The Heckman Bindery, a struggling family business in the early 1930s, had grown to stability and prosperity, at least partially as the result of the business of binding many of the books which Potterf and Reynolds bought. Picaresque adventures of all kinds had enlivened the enterprise. Reynolds summarized these adventures in a talk to the Indiana Library Association in 1977. He called his talk "Reflections on Hoosier Bookdom," but he might also have called it "A Bowdlerized Account of Life on the Road with Rex."⁶ Clerks at the venerable Acres of Books store in Cincinnati still raise their eyebrows at the mere mention of the Fort Wayne Public Library.

Rex Potterf retired from the library at the end of 1959. His successor, Fred Reynolds, had been his closest associate for one quarter of a century. Reynolds had progressed from his first job as the Fort Wayne Public Library's first bookmobile driver in 1930 to appointment as its third chief executive in 1960. Along the way, he had earned a college degree in history from Indiana University and a library degree from Western Reserve University. The slings and arrows of *Library Journal* had never dampened his enthusiasm for the library enterprise.

Reynolds brought great energy and direction to his new job. During his nineteen years as head librarian, the Fort Wayne Public Library experienced rapid growth and development in all areas. In 1963 Reynolds secured legislative changes which allowed the Fort Wayne Public

Library to embark on an ambitious building program. The 1904 Carnegie library building was replaced by a dramatically expanded main library building which opened to the public in 1968. Several small storefront branches were replaced by new modern branch buildings and adaptively renovated commercial structures. Collections, services and public use all grew rapidly.

Focusing the Collection on Genealogy

None of this growth and change was unique, for many library systems in the United States experienced similar transformations during the 1960s and 1970s. The unusual development at Fort Wayne during the administration of Fred Reynolds was the creation and enhancement of collections and services specifically tailored for genealogists.

Although he still avers that he had nothing large or spectacular in mind at the time, Fred Reynolds set about the development of collections and services for genealogists early in the 1960s in a fashion which ran contrary to both present-day tenets of the conventional wisdom. From the beginning, he did not seek to justify the library's service to genealogists on the usual ground that genealogists are taxpayers just like everyone else. Rather, he based the commitment on the idea that genealogy was a field worthy of pursuit by the public library, and that excellent collections and services would attract users, even though genealogy in the early 1960s had nothing like the popularity which it enjoys today.

The original genealogy department began operations in January 1961 in a corner of the old Carnegie building. It had about 400 books, a gift from the local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter, as its original collection, and one staff member, Dorothy M. Lower.

The early 1960s were a low period for genealogical activity in public libraries. Even The Newberry Library, which had for more than half a century been one of the major local and family history research centers in the country, was reconsidering its longstanding commitments in the field.⁷ Nevertheless, the Fort Wayne Public Library forged ahead. By 1965 Reynolds had gathered from other parts of the library all the local history and genealogy materials, most of which had a Midwestern and Northeastern focus, into the genealogy department. He had purchased all the available United States Census microfilm from the National Archives. The national scope of the collection was taking shape.⁸

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As the scope expanded, the ingenuity of the search for materials intensified. In 1965 Reynolds secured approval of an arrangement with R.L. Polk and Company and the American Association of Directory Publishers. The arrangement, which still continues, provides for the annual deposit by Polk and other directory publishers of one copy of the previous year's city directory for hundreds of American cities. The library pays only the cost of shipping. This arrangement brings in between 1000 and 1500 directories per year.⁹

The most important collection development device used by Reynolds was also a unique, unorthodox success. The method involved both the Fort Wayne Public Library and The Newberry Library in Chicago. By the mid-1960s the local and family history collection of The Newberry Library was in perilous physical condition. Hundreds of books, printed on acidic nineteenth-century paper, had become so brittle through chemical deterioration, poor environmental conditions and heavy public use, that they had been withdrawn from use. Tied up with string, they rested on back-area shelves. The floor was littered with what Joseph C. Wolf, curator of the local and family history collection during the period, called "cornflakes," the bits of paper chipped off the margins of the high-acid pages. So bad was the condition of the collection that the future of genealogy and local history at The Newberry Library was in doubt.¹⁰

At the same time, Reynolds was encountering considerable difficulty and frustration in acquiring for Fort Wayne the many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century books which were necessary for a genealogy and local history collection which was increasingly national, not just regional or local, in its scope. The great era of Bicentennial-inspired reprinting of county histories, Bible records, and similar books had not yet begun. When Reynolds could find the desired volumes in a catalog or antiquarian bookstore, they were expensive and fragile.

Reynolds and Wolf found each other. They developed a solution to both their problems. The solution both preserved the contents of the major portion of The Newberry Library's local and family history collection for research use and provided thousands of additional titles for the Fort Wayne collection. The method was simple. Wolf provided to Reynolds a photocopy of the entire Newberry Library shelf list for the appropriate parts of the collection. Reynolds and his colleagues selected from this list thousands of books which Fort Wayne lacked. These books were transported to Fort Wayne from Chicago in Fort Wayne Public Library station wagons in batches over a period of several years. When the books arrived in Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne staff produced two high-quality photocopies, on acid-free paper, of each book. The resulting

photocopied volumes were bound by a commercial library binder and put into use. One copy was at The Newberry Library and the other was at Fort Wayne. The originals went back into storage at The Newberry Library, where they continued to deteriorate at a less rapid rate.¹¹

Neither library kept good records about this process. It is apparent, however, from the shelves of both libraries, that at least 15,000, and perhaps as many as 30,000, volumes were treated in this way. The photocopied volumes are sturdy, serviceable creatures which do not preserve the physical character of the original books. Reynolds and Wolf early decided that photocopies were preferable to microfilm for this purpose. Genealogical researchers do not read a book from front to back in the scroll-like fashion required of microfilm. Rather, they search a book's indexes, lists of names and contents columns in ways which are extremely cumbersome on microfilm. The codex form of the book aids genealogical research, even though highly motivated genealogists will endure the most dismal microfilm-reading conditions in pursuit of their ancestors.

The success of the cooperative collection development project with The Newberry Library encouraged Reynolds to expand the arrangement to include a number of other public libraries, historical societies, state libraries, and other repositories of local history and genealogy information across the country. This activity still continues, although on a much smaller scale than in the mid-1970s. The Allen County Public Library makes two photocopies of the item supplied by an individual or a cooperating library. One copy stays on the shelves in Fort Wayne, and the supplier of the material receives a photocopy.

Success bred success. By late 1976 it was apparent that the new building, opened in 1968, would soon be outgrown. As the last major undertaking of his professional career, Reynolds launched the building of an addition. The second floor of the addition, which opened to the public in January 1981, more than two years after Reynolds's retirement, contains seating at tables for ninety-six researchers, twenty-four microfilm readers and shelf space for substantial expansion of the genealogy collection, which now exceeds 120,000 volumes and 30,000 rolls of microfilm.

The Funding was Conventional

Although many elements of the approach to genealogy followed by the Allen County Public Library have been unorthodox, the financing of the program has not been. Despite published reports that some form

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of special financial support has existed, the entire development has taken place within the normal operating and capital budgets of the library.¹²

Public interest and use have never disappointed the builders of the genealogy collections and services. Almost from the beginning, the local genealogists have competed for seats with people from a radius of about 150 miles. In addition to intense local and regional use, the department attracts researchers from all over the United States. It is Fort Wayne's only bonafide tourist attraction. The demolition of the only cheap downtown motel a few years ago was a serious blow, but the genealogists still keep coming from all over the United States. They spend tourist dollars for lodging, meals, parking, gasoline, and photocopies. They do not provide tax support, but they are beginning to provide support to the Friends of the Allen County Public Library.

When Fred Reynolds started a genealogy department in 1961, no one knew that *Roots* would be published. No one knew that genealogy would become a consuming major national pastime. No one knew of the demands for services and collections in genealogy which public libraries all over the nation would experience. Dorothy Lower, the first employee of the department, did not know that she would still head a major national-level research resource twenty-two years later. As she has often said, "If I had known it was going to be this big I probably never would have asked for it."¹³

So, a combination of tradition, circumstance, individual and institutional decisions, and national developments has generated excellent results. If there is any lesson to be learned from this history, it is that excellent library service can flow from seemingly unconventional foolishness as well as from conventional wisdom.

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